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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MINSK 001084

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: NEW EU INTEREST IN VISA BANS ON STATE MEDIA

REF: A. MINSK 433

[B](#). MINSK 796

[C](#). MINSK 975

[D](#). MINSK 1036

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#). (C) Embassy Minsk recommends that the Department renew its efforts to persuade European allies to expand the current EU visa ban against top officials of the Lukashenko regime to include twelve state media executives and journalists, who are responsible for some of the most egregious propaganda designed to conceal GOB electoral fraud and other abuses. This proposed expansion will undoubtedly face some reluctance on the grounds that state journalists are not GOB "action officers" and that targeting journalists violates liberal democracy's fundamental principle of freedom of the press. However, meetings with EU diplomats in Minsk following Belarusian state media's collusion with the BKGB to violate a Latvian diplomatic residence in July suggest that Brussels now regards state journalists more as agents of the Lukashenko regime than as real journalists. Ultimately, the expansion of the EU visa ban to include state propagandists would help focus the international spotlight on GOB repression of truly independent media. End Summary.

Past EU Reluctance To Include Propagandists in the Visa Ban

[2](#). (C) By May, the United States and EU had 31 individuals in common on their visa ban lists. They included top leadership of the Lukashenko regime and Central Election Commission members who were directly responsible for fraud and human rights violations during the 2006 presidential campaign and election. The joint ban also included one individual who heads Belarusian state-run media. The USG had initially sought to include the most egregious mid-level GOB media executives and journalists on the joint U.S.-EU ban to highlight their role as enablers of GOB repression against opposition and human rights activists, but EU diplomats expressed doubts whether European governments would consent (ref A).

The EU Takes a New Look after Latvian Episode

[3](#). (C) Following recent meetings with EU diplomats in Minsk, we believe the time has come to renew the Department's efforts to persuade U.S. European allies to expand the current EU visa ban to include state-media executives and high-profile journalists, who are in effect the field

commanders of the GOB propaganda machine. We think that the expansion of the EU visa ban will intensify the international spotlight on GOB repression of true journalists and therefore recommend the renewed effort begin with twelve state media figures (see para. 10).

14. (C) On September 27, German Embassy First Secretary Dr. Tilman Schmit-Neuerberg confirmed for Poloff that none of these individuals are currently included on the EU visa ban list. Moreover, he related that interest among EU missions in including state media in the joint U.S.-EU ban had significantly strengthened because of Belarusian state television's egregious collusion with the BKGB to violate a Latvian diplomat's immunity (ref B) and the continual harassment of foreign diplomats during official meetings with human rights and opposition activists. On September 29, Schmit-Neuerberg notified Poloff that the German Embassy, which currently represents the Finnish EU presidency, intends to raise the inclusion of state journalists on the EU visa ban at an upcoming meeting of EU missions in Minsk.

15. (C) When Poloff asked whether the Department would still encounter some resistance when discussing such an expansion of the visa ban with EU governments, Schmit-Neuerberg replied "possibly, but much less than before." However, he asserted that most EU governments could be convinced that, in reality, Belarusian state journalists are agents of the Lukashenko regime and, thus, there is no freedom of press in Belarus to violate by banning travel by state propagandists.

State Journalists Are Agents of the State

16. (C) In response to potential objections to extending the

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travel ban to state media employees on the grounds that they ostensibly are not GOB officials in the same sense as those included in the previous EU visa ban, we recommend the following counter-arguments:

-- Mid-level employees of state-run newspapers and the state television broadcast monopoly answer to top GOB officials, such as National State TeleRadio Company Chair Aleksandr Zimovsky, who is on the current U.S. and EU visa ban lists.

-- State media enjoy protection and close cooperation with the BKGB and other security services. This relationship was dramatically demonstrated in July when state television broadcast video footage obtained from cameras planted subrosa by Belarusian security services in a Latvian diplomat's residence. Moreover, state journalists routinely accompany GOB intelligence officers as they surveil and intimidate members of the Belarusian opposition and/or independent media during meetings with U.S. diplomats (refs C and D).

17. (C) In short, Belarusian state journalists are not true journalists; they are high-profile agents of the Lukashenko regime.

There Is No Freedom of Press in Belarus to Violate

18. (C) Conceding that state journalists are not independent, the unconvinced may compare BT and other state media to the Voice of America or Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and oppose such a ban on the grounds that even state media are protected under liberal democracy's principle of freedom of the press. Indeed, this principle would hold true if freedom of the press existed in Belarus. However, in reality, the regime uses every means at its disposal, direct and indirect, to repress independent media to the point where there is virtually no freedom of press to violate by banning state journalists.

-- Direct Repression. In December 2005, President Lukashenko signed amendments that criminalize the dissemination of what the GOB considers "false information" about Belarus. The amendments followed the authorities' closure of five independent newspapers and evictions of several others from their offices. Furthermore, the Belarusian authorities frequently arrest or detain foreign and independent journalists and destroy their source materials. Finally, independent journalists report to the Embassy that the authorities often prevent them from attending official press conferences and from receiving information from official sources.

-- Indirect Repression. Throughout Belarus, independent media face numerous distribution problems resulting from GOB pressure, including exclusion from the Belarusian postal service catalogue and state-controlled kiosks. Encouraged and empowered by national authorities, local officials use economic instruments, such as arbitrary restrictions on advertisers and subscriptions and special punitive tax rates to keep independent media in a perpetual state of bankruptcy. Moreover, authorities frequently bar independent journalists from employment in state-owned companies.

Post's Proposed List: The Dirty Dozen

19. (C) We propose the following individuals already on the U.S. visa ban list, be included in the EU visa ban (alternate spellings in parentheses followed by known dates and places of birth):

-- Yuriy Vladimirovich Azerenok (Yury Uladzimiravich Azerenok), b. Vitebsk, Belarus, 27 February 1965. Answering directly to Zimovsky, Azerenok is Deputy Head of Belarus' National State Tele-Radio Company, which controls BT, ONT, and several regional state television and radio networks.

-- Yevgeny Viktorovich Novikov (Yauheni Viktaravich Novikau), b. Belarus, 1956. Novikov is Deputy Head of TV channel "BT." Under Novikov's leadership, BT produced numerous weekly propaganda programs designed to conceal GOB election fraud and other human rights abuses. For example, "Panorama" aired numerous reports designed to obstruct international election observation and conceal systematic GOB fraud and abuse during the 2004 parliamentary elections, such as "Belarus Welcomes Foreign Observers" in September 2004. In February, during the 2006 presidential campaign, Panorama ran a six-day series disparaging the opposition and staged a fake call in program

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with Central Election Commission Secretary Nikolay Lozovik. Meanwhile, Panorama devoted more than 40 percent of its stories, all positive, to President Lukashenko and less than 0.5 percent to opposition candidates.

-- Yuriy Groyerov (Yury Groerau). Groerov is Deputy Director of Information Service, TV channel "BT." Groerov coordinates collection of information on opposition groups and foreign diplomats for BT documentaries. As recently as August 27, Groyerov collaborated with Yury Propokov to produce a story aired on BT program "In Focus" about U.S.- and EU-supported opposition groups allegedly training in secret camps in Belarus to stage a violent coup against the GOB.

-- Grigory Leonidevich Kisel (Hryhory Leanidavich Kisel), b. Zdudichi, Gomel Oblast, 23 August 1955. Kisel is head of TV channel "ONT," a partner company of TV channel "BT" within the National State TeleRadio Company.

-- Yuri Vasilevich Koziyatko (Yury Vasilyevich Kaziyatka), b. Brest, Belarus, 1964. Koziyatko is head of TV channel "STV." STV is a Minsk city government company that broadcasts on a frequency expropriated by the GOB from independent "Channel 8" in January 2001. Koziyatko enjoys close contact with President Lukashenko. Under Koziyatko's leadership, STV has

repeatedly run numerous interviews with President Lukashenko and documentaries maligning opposition leaders, including "Conspirology," which was produced during Belarus' 2004 parliamentary elections.

-- Yuri Propokov (Yury Prakopau), b. 7 October 1978. Propokov is the producer, host, and journalist with TV channel "BT." On September 6, Propokov produced a BT story that manipulated past footage of Embosffs' regional travels throughout Belarus to allege that U.S. diplomats raid secret opposition headquarters to locate opposition activists who will work as USG agents. Propokov previously produced and hosted numerous stories and documentaries maligning foreign diplomats and Belarusian human rights groups, including an expose violating the residence of a Latvian diplomat in July, the 2006 documentary "Diplomatic Mission Impossible," and a malicious September 2005 anti-opposition segment on BT's program "In Focus."

-- Yuriy Lednik (Yury Lednik). Lednik is a journalist of TV channel BT who hosted numerous pro-regime, anti-opposition, and anti-West stories produced by Propokov during the 2006 presidential elections. On July 5, Lednik hosted a story that was produced with footage from the Independence Day party at the Ambassador's residence and portrayed opposition leaders and human rights activists in attendance as soliciting and embezzling USG money for personal gain.

-- Gleb Lavrov (Hleb Laurau). Lavrov is a high-profile journalist of TV channel "BT" and is said to boast of being head of BT's "counter-propaganda team." Lavrov hosted numerous pro-regime and anti-opposition stories produced by Propokov during the 2006 presidential elections.

-- Aleksandr Averkov (Aleksandr Averkau), b. Arkadan, Saratov Oblast, Russia, 23 January 1960. Journalist of TV channel "ONT." Averkov produced numerous stories intended to conceal GOB human rights abuses during the March presidential election.

-- Viktor Valentinovich Chikin (Viktar Valiantsinavich Chykin), b. Minsk, 9 April 1949. Chikin is Editor of the state-run paper "Seven Dnei," which published numerous articles intended to conceal GOB human rights abuses during the March presidential election.

-- Yevgeniy Antonovich Rostikov (Yauheni Antonovich Rastikau), b. 1945, Vitebsk, Belarus. Rostikov is a journalist with the state-run paper "Respublika." He regularly writes stories maligning Belarusian opposition groups, such as February 9 story alleging U.S. and EU support for Belarusian youth militants at training bases in Lithuania.

-- Pavel Izotovitch Yakubovich (Pavel Izotavich Yakubovich), b. Unecha, Bryansk Oblast, Russia. Yakubovich is the Editor of the state-run newspaper "Sovetskaya Belarussiya," which published numerous articles intended to conceal GOB human rights abuses during the March presidential election. Yakubovich oversaw the printing of 830,000 copies (300,000 more than normal circulation) of the paper's March 15 issue, which headlined articles denouncing the opposition for trying to steal a "good and pure life" from the Belarusian people with the aid of "political technologies" financed from

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abroad. Yakubovich himself praised the articles as "describing the situation in terms of what we have achieved over all these years."

Comment

¶10. (C) This proposed expansion of the visa ban will certainly face some opposition from certain circles of the EU. However, this opposition will likely be less intense

than before and more receptive to the arguments offered herein in the wake of state television's recent collusion with the BKGB to violate a Latvian diplomat's residence. Ultimately, the expansion of the EU visa ban to include GOB pseudo-journalists will focus the international spotlight on GOB repression of independent media.

Stewart